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The Blessedness of those who die in the Lord.

A
S E R M O N,

Occasioned by the DEATH of
THOMAS BENSON, Esq;
of CARLISLE.

By ROBERT MILN, A.M. K.

NEWCASTLE UPON TYNE,
PRINTED by T. SLACK.

M.DCC.LXXVIII.

[Price SIX-PENCE.]

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R E V. xiv. 13.

And I heard a voice from Heaven, saying unto me, Write, Blessed are the dead which die in the Lord, from henceforth: Yea, saith the Spirit, that they may rest from their labours; and their works do follow them.

A Wise man long ago observed, That (a) it is better to go to the house of mourning, than to the house of feasting; for that is the end of all flesh, and the living will lay it to heart. And an apostle of Christ exhorts all his followers, not only to (b) rejoice with them that do rejoice, but to mourn with them that do mourn.

THIS, like many other precepts of religion, may seem ungrateful to flesh and blood; yet we will find the practice of it attended with great advantage: For thereby, we not only indulge the dictates of humanity, but at the same time, excite and cherish in our minds those tender feelings of sympathy and friendly concern, which are both necessary and or-

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(a) Ecclef. vii. 2.

(b) Rom. xii. 15.

namental to our natures, in this state of frailty and imperfection. But were we never to approach the confines of the gloomy mansion,—never behold with our eyes, *the house appointed for all living*; we would do well to consider, that we are but men—like those who have gone before us, and hold our existence here, by a tenure equally precarious and uncertain. We may, indeed, put the *evil day far off*, but we cannot banish it from our calendar; yea, nor for a single moment retard its progress; for it advances on the wings of time with such a rapid career, that it is in vain to think of flying from it.

SEEING, then, that this day will overtake us, in which we must enter on the last and *fiery conflict*,—would it not be our wisdom and our prudence, timeously to prepare for it, in such a manner, that we might come off with victory and triumph. If this be our chief study and aim, religion will step in to our aid, and put into our hands such weapons as no created power can resist: It will administer hope in death, allay the fears, and *raise the courage of the good man*, when his heart and flesh begin to faint and fail.

It is to Religion alone, but especially the Christian, that we are indebted for any tidings from the grave, which can furnish matter of consolation: For Sense brings up an evil

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report of that land. It tells us, that (a) *Joseph is torn in pieces by a wild beast*: This whispers in our ear, that *he is now Lord of all Egypt*. Sense informs us, that (b) *our friend Lazarus is dead*: This bids us dry up our tears, for *he is not dead, but sleepeth*; and his Saviour shall awaken him in the morning of the day, not the same frail and corruptible creature which he formerly was, but now adorned with spotless purity, and incorruptible glory, like unto an angel of God! And, of so great importance is this truth to mankind, that nothing less than a voice from Heaven is thought worthy to proclaim it, saying, **BLESSED ARE THE DEAD WHICH DIE IN THE LORD!**

To die in the Lord, is a phrase of a very emphatic meaning, and is similar to another expression in the writings of the Apostles, namely, that of (c) *sleeping in Jesus*. It is generally thought, that both these allude to the primitive martyrs and confessors, who died for conscience sake,—and with their blood sealed the truth of their religion. But the words need not be confined to them alone. It may with equal truth be affirmed, that all they who have *lived the life of the righteous*,—who by faith in Christ, and a conversation becoming his gospel, have attained to the character of his sincere followers, shall likewise *die in the Lord*, i. e. in a state of favour and reconciliation with him.

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BUT

(a) Gen. xlv. 26.

(b) John xi. 11.

(c) 1 Thess. iv. 14.

BUT it is added, FROM HENCEFORTH, YEA, SAITH THE SPIRIT, *that they may rest from their labours, and their works do follow them.*

Few of those who have hitherto attempted to explain these words, have been able to find in them a sense which is either rational or consistent. Whereas, by adverting, that in the prophetic stile, men are said to do and suffer what is only the natural effect and consequence of the doctrines laid before them, the meaning becomes exceedingly pertinent and plain; and it is this, When that period shall arrive, which the inspired writer has here under his view, the Christian Religion, of which the divine spirit is the inditer, shall be, in a great measure, purged from the leaven of human doctrines; such as that of a separate spirit after death entering upon an intermediate state, and passing through a new scene of action, or any kind of purification. Then, *from henceforth*, this truth shall be established, and universally believed, That as death destroys the man, it consigns him over to a state of rest and inaction, till his Saviour shall raise him to life,—once more reunite his soul and body,—and thus render him capable of enjoying the fruit of his former works.

I NOW proceed to what I have principally in view: The consideration of that future happiness which awaits all those who die in the Lord.

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THIS is described in our text in a two-fold light. First, as the privation of pain ;—then, as the actual enjoyment of bliss. Or, in other words, first, as the breaking down this frail tenement of clay, with every disagreeable appendage belonging to it ;—and then, as the renovation of the whole man in purity and glory. Blessed are the dead which die in the Lord,—THEY REST FROM THEIR LABOURS ;—not only from the exercise of their active powers, but from distress and misery of every kind !

EVER since sin entered into the world, its rueful attendants, sorrow, toil, and death, have been sensibly felt, and deeply regretted by men of every age and nation. Universal experience hath confirmed this melancholy truth, (a) *Man who is born of a woman is of few days, and full of trouble.* Why almighty goodness suffered evil of any kind to enter into the world, and tarnish the beauty of his workmanship, is beyond the reach of our present capacities to account for. The solving this, and such like difficulties, may be reserved as an addition to our future happiness. Yet Revelation throws as much light upon this mystery, as is perhaps either fit or necessary for us, in this imperfect state ; where we can see but darkly, as through a glass. It tells us, (b) *God hath made man upright, but they have sought out many in-*

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(a) Job xiv. 1.

(b) Ecclef. vii. 29.

ventions. Now, all these inventions, and every evil incident to man, are here comprehended in the word Labours. These indeed are more than can be numbered. I shall therefore, at present, only touch at a few of the more obvious and striking.

IN our very constitution are sown the seeds of future labours, which grow with our years, and are ripened by many and unforeseen accidents. The tender plant of life is committed to the care of every man,—and Nature obliges him to rear it. This proves the never-failing source of much inquietude, labour, and pain. In infancy, sighs and tears may indicate our complaints; but we can do nothing of ourselves to redress them. As we advance in years, when reason ripens, and experience teaches us precaution, we find it above our power to ward off the attacks of sickness, and maladies of various kinds. These, like restless demons, watch our steps,—conceal themselves in the air we breathe,—and food which we eat; and by a thousand different ways, insinuate themselves to the very seat of life, where they prey upon our health,—blast our comforts,—and take from us the relish of every temporal enjoyment.

BUT were we so happy as to be placed by Nature beyond the reach of these, there are labours of a different kind,
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which we can never entirely shake off. The former pursue us; but the latter we pursue. For we no sooner become capable of judging and acting for ourselves, than a question naturally occurs to us, which engrosses our attention by night and by day: (a) *What shall I eat? What shall I drink? and wherewithal shall I be clothed? What shall I do to be completely happy?* The solving this question lays the foundation of much labour, and sore travail to the sons of men. For neglecting to follow that light, which God and Nature have given us for a guide, we allow ourselves to be decoyed by a deceitful meteor; which, while it dazzles the eye of the traveller, seldom fails to lead him into a snare. Simple Nature is soon supplied, because her wants are few. But when imagination takes the lead, and directs the course of life, innumerable wants spring up on every side; and these are often so diametrically opposite, that we can only indulge one at the expence of another. What makes the worldly man impair his health of body and peace of mind? And why does the ambitious man tread on the laws of truth and conscience, in order to reach the summit of his wishes? Is it not, that each may gratify some imaginary want? And it will be found upon enquiry, that those evils which are merely chimerical, do, among the generality of mankind, overbalance in the scale, and exceed in num-

(a) *Matt. vi. 31.*

number, those which are real and unavoidable. Hence, as the things of this world are in their nature illusive and fugitive, mankind by constantly pursuing them are kept in one eternal round of fruitless labour, and delusive hope.

But it may be said of the best of men, that their life is full of trouble. Providence assigns to them their share of natural evils, in common with others; yea, they feel some of these with a greater degree of poignancy. For that sensibility of soul, which is always connected with probity of heart, renders them more susceptible of the wounds of grief,—of ingratitude or false friendship, than the worthless and obdurate. Besides, virtuous men have many labours, from which the wicked are exempted, in watching over their deceitful hearts, curbing their unruly passions, and cultivating that temper of mind, which can afford them peace and comfort while they are here,—and fit them for a happy immortality hereafter.

Now, would we not call that soldier happy, who, with honour and applause, had finished an arduous and bloody campaign? Or that mariner, who had reached his destined haven, after a long and dangerous voyage; during which he was often exposed to lowring tempests, boisterous waves, and hidden rocks, which lurked for his destruction within
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the deep? But what are all the labours,—what the dangers to which a man can be exposed, from the warring elements,—the raging sea,—or vicissitudes of life;—compared with those more fatal ones, from which he is finally delivered, who hath fallen asleep in Jesus?

THE picture of death which I have already drawn, may appear soothing; but it is also gloomy and affecting. For could we say nothing more of our departed friends, than that they *have rested from their labours*,—we might then *(a)* *farrow, like them who have no hope.* But our holy religion exhibits this last and great enemy of the human race, in a more agreeable and pleasing view. It tells us, that the Son of God descended from Heaven into this lower world, that he might disarm Death of his poisonous darts, and rob him of his deadly sting. And that *(b)* *he is the resurrection and the life; so that all they who believe on him, though they were dead, yet they shall live again; AND THEIR WORKS DO FOLLOW THEM.*

VARIOUS controversies have arisen in the Christian church, concerning the nature and efficacy of good works. But, in my opinion, the whole of these have a tendency to bewilder and perplex, rather than to edify. It has happened

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(a) 1 Thess. iv. 13.

(b) John xi. 25.

in these, as in most religious disputes, that the contending parties have run to extremes, and left the truth between them. Some have extolled the merit of good works, so as to exclude the grace of God;—while others have allowed them no place in the scheme of religion, but have substituted faith; or more properly speaking, credulity, in their stead.

THE last of these errors is doubtless the most dangerous; because it is better to maintain good works in the world, under any denomination, than to banish them entirely from it. I can scarcely believe, that a man endowed with reason, and in the least enlightened by Revelation, can harbour the notion, That his works can either *profit the Almighty*, or be considered by him as an equivalent for *an exceeding and an eternal weight of glory*. Yet if we look into the Christian system, we will find, that works make an essential part of it; and are therein described, both as a condition, and as a qualification for future happiness. To deny this, would be un- hinging the whole of that sacred institution, and offering the greatest violence to the language of the divine Spirit. Against whom are all the judgments of God denounced in sacred writing? And who are they that *shall have their part and portion in the (a) lake that burneth with fire and brim- stone?* Are they any otherwise characterised, than being work-

(a) Rev. xxi. 8.

workers of iniquity? Hear the concluding sentence of the supreme judge: (a) *Behold, I come quickly, and my reward is with me, to render to every man according to his works.* And when a young man asked our Saviour, (b) *What was the condition of entering into life?*—all the answer he gave him was, *That he must keep the commandments.*

BUT in order to give a more distinct view of this subject, it may be proper to remark the following things.

FIRST, Those works to which happiness is annexed under the Gospel, are not to be estimated from the outward action, but derive their value from the principles or motives whence they proceed. Thus, a man may give all his goods to the poor, and yet be destitute of charity. The motives to piety and virtue are many and various, arising from the different obligations which we lie under, as reasonable and accountable beings; yet, in the sacred stile, they are all summed up in one word, viz. Faith;—without which, it is declared, no man can come to God,—or expect to be rewarded by him. Yet from this we are not to infer, that in every action of our life it is necessary to have the proper motive actually in our mind;—it is sufficient, if we are under the habitual influence of good and virtuous principles.

(a) *Rev. xxii. 12.*

(b) *Matt. xix. 16.*

SECONDLY, No works will be accepted of at last, but such as render the character compleat. Thus, piety to God, without charity to men, instead of procuring a reward, will aggravate our guilt,—and render our punishment more severe. The Apostle *John* declares, that (a) *if any man say he loves God, and yet hates his brother, he is a liar, and the truth is not in him.* There cannot be a more gross or dangerous error than to imagine that a punctual obedience to the first table of the law, will compensate for our neglect of the second.

ON the other hand, bare morality, that is, Truth, Justice, Equity, and the other virtues of social life, may acquit a man before a human tribunal,—but can never of themselves constitute a character fit to appear at the bar of him who is our creator, and will be our sovereign judge. What notion would we entertain of that person who is punctual in paying one man what he owes him, but at the same time withholds from another what he is under much stronger obligations to pay? And this is the case of the mere moralist. He values himself upon the justness of his dealings among men; yet never reflects, that he owes any thing to the God who made him, and Saviour that redeemed him: He makes no conscience of paying to them those returns of gratitude

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(a) 1 *John* iv. xx.

and duteous homage, which reason dictates,—and without which, Revelation declares, no man can see his God, and be happy. The good *Centurion* was highly favoured by the Almighty, because his (a) *alms and his prayers jointly came up before him as a memorial*. Hence learn, that Religion and true Morality are inseparable. They mutually support each other, like the two sides of an arch, one of which being taken away, the whole is rendered useless. But after all, I shall readily allow, that in a strict and absolute sense, no works whatever can give us a claim upon Heaven. It is our father's good-will to promise us the kingdom; and on this promise solely, our title is founded. But this is so far from absolving us from practical obedience, that it suggests the strongest argument to enforce it.

BUT works may be considered in another view,—as a qualification indispensibly necessary for the enjoyment of future bliss. In sacred writing, Heaven is painted forth not so much under the idea of a particular place, as of a state;—a state of felicity,—of endless and exquisite joy. Now, all happiness and pleasure arise from the enjoyment of such objects as are suited to our different desires. If this maxim be true, (and undoubtedly it is) it follows of consequence, that the profligate and immoral are, in the very nature of the thing,

(a) *AB: x. 31.*

thing, expressly debarred from sharing in the celestial beatitude;—from participating of *those joys which flow from the right-hand of the Most High*. Yea, to them, Heaven could be no Heaven at all. There the worldly miser would find none of that treasure, which was the sole object of his joy, his confidence, and hope.—There, the cruel or insidious could have no opportunity of sacrificing a simple brother, either to their ambition or avarice.—There, the malicious and revengeful would in vain look around them for darts, to throw at the objects of their hatred;—in vain would they seek for an ear open to the whispers of calumny and slander.—There, pride and arrogance could erect no altars, to receive the incense of flattery and adulation.—There, the impious wretch,—the habitual trampler on God's holy name, would shrink back at the thoughts of appearing in the awful presence of him, before whom *all the heavenly hosts cast down their crowns and worship*.—Whereas, on the other hand, all they, who, while they lived on earth, had *their conversation in Heaven*,—who had studied the language, and learned the manners of the heavenly *Canaan*,—would, at their departure from this world, be found predisposed, and suitably qualified, for mingling with the society, and joining in the employment of the blessed spirits there.

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BUT perhaps the truest and most exalted notion which we can form of Heaven, is, a state of pure, and social intercourse, —where the happiness of the whole adds to that of every individual. Therefore, the truly humane,—the charitable and benevolent man, who felt no happiness on earth equal to that of disseminating happiness and joy around him, as he is of all created beings the likest to an angel of God; so, of all others, he is fittest for being admitted a member of that blessed assembly.

BUT the above truth receives additional weight, by considering the different characters which constitute the society of the heavenly abodes. There, is God, *the Judge of all*,—a being of untainted purity and holiness.—There, is Jesus Christ, *the mediator of the new covenant*,—the ever glorious and triumphant captain of our salvation.—There, is an *innumerable company* of immaculate *angels*, and the *spirits* of just men made perfect. And does not the very mentioning of these, the blissful co-inhabitants of the new Jerusalem, sufficiently convince us, that none but the benevolent, the pure, and upright, can find admittance there. Upon the whole, both Reason and Revelation concur in declaring, that (a) *glory, honour, and immortality*, shall only be conferred on them who seek for the same, by a *patient continuance in well-doing*. (b) *Say ye then unto the righteous, it shall be well with him.*

(a) Rom. ii. 7.

(b) Isa. iii. 10.

H A V I N G

HAVING now illustrated this truth, That they are blessed who die in the Lord,—I shall conclude with exhorting all, to inure themselves to frequent and serious meditation upon the great objects of a future state; particularly upon death, judgment, and eternity.

To those who are young, this would be attended with many advantages. It would cure that levity and dissipation of spirit, which ingenders folly,—enervates the mind,—and is often succeeded by dejection and conscious remorse. While their minds are apt to be intoxicated, and their affections captivated with those gilded and delusive scenes which this world pictures to their senses,—this would point out to them more worthy,—more refined and exquisite enjoyments; and direct them in the path which they ought to pursue, so as to become possessed of them.

BUT this is more peculiarly the business of those who are advanced in years. When the day of labour is drawing to a close, so that the sun casts his beams but faintly on the dial of life, it is time,—yea, more than time, for all such to bethink themselves, what they have been doing ever since they were sent into the world. Whether they have improved their different talents and advantages in such a manner, as cometh reasonable and moral agents. Whether, as Chris-

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tians, they have acted consistently with their profession, and brought forth the fruits of their religion, in love and reverence to God, and in charity to men. Whether they have practised justice, truth, equity, temperance, and sobriety; and thus conducted themselves through life in a suitableness to the dignity of their nature. And, if their works are to follow them, whether their judge can with truth say, (a) *Well done, good and faithful servants*;—or whether they have reason to dread the awful sentence, (b) *Depart from me, ye workers of iniquity*.

Be persuaded then to follow after them, who through faith and patience have already finished their course,—and are deemed worthy to take possession of the promised land: And, in order the more effectually to promote such a pious disposition of mind, and suitable conduct in life, I shall now pay a grateful tribute to the memory of a departed and worthy friend. I need not mention his name, for I believe it is deeply engraven on the hearts of most of this audience.

In our eulogiums upon our friends, we are generally suspected of partiality,—and perhaps not without reason; for friendship, like *charity, covereth a multitude of sins*. Yet, when

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(a) *Matt. xxv. 21.*

(b) *Matt. xxv. 41.*

in this man I exhibit to you a picture of human nature, perhaps as amiable as any to be met with in this mixed and imperfect state, I flatter myself, that few who are acquainted with him, will think me transgressing the bounds of truth. In him so many virtues were united, that were I to enumerate the whole, I should be at a loss where to begin;—neither should I know when to end.

“ If we consider him as a man and citizen of the world, how many and eminent were the qualities which he possessed? An artless and guiltless simplicity of heart appeared in the whole of his manner and deportment. His very countenance bespoke a placid serenity of mind, and singular sweetness of disposition. Nature had displayed him to open view;—and indeed there was no occasion for a veil. His address was so easy and engaging, and so far removed from art and affectation, that it seemed congenial with the man. Among his friends and companions, an innocent cheerfulness gave a peculiar relish to his conversation; and wherever he was he pleased, because he seemed to be ever among his equals. His judgment was strong: His understanding clear and unclouded with passion; which gave him, in reasoning, a superiority over most men. His disposition prompted him to hospitality;—in this he was exceeded by none. His soul revolted at the thoughts of cruelty and oppression;—for which reason he was a strenuous asserter of civil and
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religious liberty. Blest with a mild and forgiving spirit, he lived in peace with himself and all good men:—and he had such command over his passions, that even ingratitude could hardly excite his indignation; neither could those injuries, which in another would have kindled up resentment, beget in him the least malevolence of disposition. He was a man of great integrity and uprightness of heart, in the common transactions of life. This made others place an entire confidence in him: And it is well known in what estimation he was held by that * noble person under whom he acted. In him were united, the steady friend, the generous master, the kind and tender parent. Like his maker, he drew his children with the *cords of love, and bands of affection*. Pride he never knew. And he always thought that human acquirements, however great or many, when weighed in the balance of reason or religion, were so very inconsiderable, as to preclude vanity and arrogance. His humility could be exceeded by nothing but his charity. Indeed, when practising this virtue, he seemed to move in his native sphere. Warm was his heart;—it glowed with generous love and goodwill to all. On

CH. 2. *of the Duke of Portland's* C 2 *writing to the Duke of* this

* He always seemed happy when he had an opportunity of expressing his grateful regard to his Grace the D. of Portland; and often mentioned the following Anecdote of that Nobleman.—When he was last at the Duke's seat in Nottinghamshire, his Grace gave him in charge at parting, That whenever a difference in point of interest should arise betwixt him and any of his farmers, he should always cast the balance in favour of the latter; adding withal, that he could better bear the loss than they.

this altar the sacred fire was never extinguished. For others, the mourners may go about the streets: For him, the chief mourners will sit at home, consoled with their destitute families, the loss of their generous benefactor;—who clothed the naked, fed the hungry, and made the heart of the fatherless and widow to sing for joy.

“But the noblest part of his character is yet remaining; I mean, that of a sincere and unaffected Christian. Convinced that the sacred oracles were the true and only fountain of religious knowledge, he frequently perused them; especially those parts which give the brightest display of the renovation and recovery of mankind, from a state of degradation and ruin. And he seldom failed to introduce religious subjects, when he could hope to be instructed or edified. Truth was his sole aim; and probity of heart seldom failed to lead him in the way to it. His principles were rational and sound;—his piety humble and calm;—and he worshipped his God in spirit and in truth: While his soul was too liberal, and his heart too good, to be enslaved by popular prejudices, or narrow and contracted notions. He often mentioned the benefit of religion,—especially in seasons of distress. To this he could bear testimony, from his own experience; for, like those whom God loves, he had been chastised. His amiable partner had been torn from his bosom.

som by a sudden and untimely death, after leaving him several dear pledges of their mutual love. (May Providence long preserve them, to be worthy representatives of such parents.) And not long ago, when bodily infirmity had almost unhinged his frame, he met with a severe shock; which, as he has since owned, nothing but Religion could have supported him under, with any becoming degree of patience and resignation. I mean the death of a beloved child; into whose mind were sown such early seeds of virtue, that they seemed fitter to grow up in the Paradise of God, than in this wilderness,—the native soil of briars and thorns. But to sum up the character of this good man in a few words: It may be appealed to all who were acquainted with him, if they ever knew a man to whom the encomium bestowed by our Saviour upon one of his own countrymen was more applicable, *(a) Behold an Israelite indeed, in whom there is no guile.*" But he is gone!—Farewel then, thou best of men! though not for ever.—I trust we shall hereafter behold thee among the sons of light. He who gave us thee, has judged the world no longer worthy of thee, and has therefore recalled thee to himself. On earth, thy works have left behind thee a name more savoury than ointment poured forth; and in Heaven they stand recorded in the book of life.—Cold is thy bed, but sweet and refreshing shall be thy sleep. 'Ere long, the trump of God shall

(a) *John i. 47.*

May we live, that with him, and all the redeemed of the Lord, we may reap the everlasting fruits of that important truth, **Blessed are the dead which die in the Lord: They rest from their labours; and their works do follow them. Amen.**

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